THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW
ABOUT YOUR EYES
by
John E. Weeks, M.D.
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Things You Should Know About Your Eyes

How you may be abusing them—and how you can take care of them

By John E. Weeks, M.D.

THOUSANDS of men who wanted to serve their country in this time of the nation's need have been turned down because of defective vision. The percentage of rejections on this account makes it evident that we, as a people, are not taking care of our eyes as we should.

This being apparent, the Editor of THE AMERICAN MAGAZINE asked Dr. John E. Weeks of New York, one of the most distinguished eye specialists in the world, to tell as simply and clearly as possible how to take care of the eyes in ordinary everyday living. Doctor Weeks has met the request with the very thing everybody will be glad to read—not an elaborate medical treatise, but a direct, helpful statement which the average reader can understand and apply to his own case.

FEW people realize how greatly eyestrain can affect one's general efficiency. Many persons who always feel tired, who wonder at the end of the day why they should be so exhausted, who complain of constant headache or of other minor ills, are surprised when they are told that the source of all their troubles lies in their eyes.

Until pain actually sets in, most people never suspect that their eyes may not be perfectly normal and healthy. Yet so common is eyestrain that when twenty million school children were examined recently it was found that the eyes of five million of them needed attention. And of the entire population of this country it is safe to say that the eyes of at least two thirds, or sixty-six million people, are in need of examination.

Because the eyes of almost all persons are approximately normal at birth, there can be no doubt that carelessness is the cause of most eye troubles. People do almost everything to strain the eye and practically nothing to rest it. Loss of sight is one of the worst—if not the worst—things that can happen to one. Yet, through lack of knowledge and lack of care, people's eyesight is jeopardized constantly.

Take, for example, the question of one's physical condition: There can be no doubt that such ailments as indigestion, constipation, and overstrain of the nerves affect the eyes very materially, especially if they are already in a weakened condition. When the stomach is upset by overeating, by eating too fast or by improper food, this derangement of the stomach is likely to cause the eyes to ache, spots to float in front of them, or in actual cases of ptomaine poisoning, caused by eating food of poor quality, to affect the vision itself.

In the same way, tobacco and whisky are two things which people who wish to conserve their sight will do well to use in moderation. Overuse of tobacco may inflame the optic nerve, and in time may impair the vision. Alcohol, used to excess for five or ten years, often causes marked reduction of vision, and in some extreme cases total blindness. Temporary blindness, caused by consuming too much liquor at one time, is not infrequent among heavy drinkers. Alcohol affects the eyes almost as surely as it affects the heart.

These are not uncommon ways in which people's eyes are injured by what they eat and drink; but their greatest carelessness is in regard to the light by which they read or work.

Because all our writing and reading starts from the left side of the page, thus causing our eyes to do the majority of their work on the left side, it has become an accepted fact that light, whether natural or artificial, should always come from behind and over the left shoulder. It should either do this or come from directly overhead, because if one works long while facing a strong light the eyes are subjected to a very bad strain. No one should ever sit facing a window or any strong glare, such as an unshaded light, for very long. No one should ever try to read anything when in such a position that the book or paper is between the eyes and the light, thus shutting off a great deal of the light. It would be a good thing, if possible, if even desk lights could be so arranged as to direct the light from behind. When a desk light is a few inches toward the front of the desk, however, is properly shaded, and is not too powerful, the strain on the eyes is not very bad; the angle of reflection being a fairly good one. But this is the only exception to the rule that the light should come from behind and over the left shoulder.

MANY people work in glaring lights without realizing the strain that the glare puts on the eye. One should never allow the sun, for example, to shine on a newspaper or book, because of the inevitable glare produced. In the same way, gazing at anything intensely white, such as snow, for any length of time will often cause snow blindness. While this blindness will be only temporary, it is, nevertheless, harmful to the vision. Artificial lights should also be watched lest they be too strong for the eyes. If a light makes your eyes begin to blink upon entering a room, you can know that it is too strong. When working at a desk, two or three candle-power is fully sufficient.

Though daylight is much preferable to artificial light, some people are penny wise and pound foolish in trying to squeeze the last ounce of light from the day in order to cut down the electric bill. Practice economy, of course, but not at the expense of your eyes. It might be a good thing for you to turn on your artificial light at four or four-thirty in winter time, even though you think you can still see well enough to work by daylight. You may think the light is sufficient, whereas the fact will be that the light has diminished a little, thus putting an extra strain on your eyes.

As to the kind of light, the best in daytime is a northern light. A north light causes less pronounced shadows, and for several other reasons it is much better than east, west, or south. As to artificial light, the ordinary electric system, placed in an indirect illumination system, is the best. By indirect illumination I mean, of course, the light that shines from a globe to the ceiling and is reflected from the ceiling through the room.

Just as you can exhaust a horse through overwork, you can exhaust your eyes through overuse. People with normal eyes, for example, should never read, write, sew, or do any kind of close work, for more than two or three hours at a time, in the daytime. For people with weak eyes, one hour should be the limit of close application of the eyes. Whenever the eyes are used for lengthy periods, you should, also, stop every twenty minutes or so and rest the eyes for five or ten minutes. If you have a hard day's work ahead of you, or have just finished a hard job, washing the eyes with a teaspoonful of ordinary table salt to a pint of cold water will be an excellent thing to refresh and rest them. Salt has an invigorating effect on the eyes, and for that reason salt water bathing is good for persons whose eyes are at all troublesome.

The less work one does at night the better it is, of course, for the eyes. Children, for example, should never use their eyes at night for any period exceeding fifteen minutes to a half hour. The same is true about adults whose eyes are not in the best of shape.

Questions about reading in bed and on trains, and the effect that moving pictures have on the eyes, are often asked.

Reading or writing in bed is not harmful, provided your body is in a semi-reclining position with the light striking your book in the proper manner. Reading while lying flat on your back—or face down either, for that matter—is harmful, for such a position makes the blood rush to your head, causing congestion and affecting the tissues of the eye in a distressing manner. Reading on trains is not harmful if the light is strong enough and if the train does not shake your book or paper to such a degree that the letters dance before your eyes.

As for the movies, they do not injure the eyes as much as they fatigue them. That is why people often find it difficult to keep awake at a moving picture. The rapid shift of scenes, as well as the strong relief of light and shadow, tires their eyes. When the eyes are tired, the lids involuntarily droop; and this helps to produce sleep. When the flicker of a screen disturbs the vision, however, it causes the eye to tire quickly.

In connection with the subject of strain, I might add that there are certain colors which people would do well to avoid. Strong reds and purples, and in fact all dark shades when used for walls and hangings, are bad for the eyes because they absorb the light much more than other colors do. If you can dictate the color of the room where you intend to do much work, choose light gray or cream colors. You may not like light colors, but please remember that they are much the best for your eyes.

BECAUSE there is much misconception on the subject of the "inheritance of weak eyes," I want to say a word on that subject.

Eye weaknesses, as a rule, are not inherited. What sometimes does happen is that a child inherits a "tendency" to develop defects of vision, without inheriting the actual defect itself. In other words, if a parent's eyes had any form of eye trouble, the child might inherit the "tendency" to develop the same kind of trouble. It is just the same as saying that a child born of stage people may inherit the ability to sing and dance without actually ever making a demonstration of that ability. Therefore young parents who are anxious about their children's eyes just because their own are weak or defective have no great cause for worry.

If any defect has been inherited, however, it usually makes itself known early in life, or at about the time that a child first goes to school. It is for that reason that one of the requirements of admission to schools should be an examination of a child's eyes. Discovered at an early stage, any defects which may exist can be promptly taken care of. Or if a child's eyes are too weak to undergo the strain of school work, other arrangements for the child's education will be made. Also, with the knowledge that a child has defective vision, the careful teacher will seat him in the best light possible.

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too strongly upon such an examination, for our records show that nearsightedness steadily increases in children as they continue their school work, beginning anywhere between the ages of three and ten and ceasing somewhere between twenty-two and twenty-seven. In some cases, however, nearsightedness does not cease to increase then, and the result is often the complete loss of the power of sight at the age of fifty or sixty, if not sooner.

Children are not the only ones, however, who should use precautions in the care of their eyes. Such work as tailoring, bookkeeping, or other occupations entailing close application of the eyes, almost always causes nearsightedness and other forms of eye trouble.

Civilized persons are nearsighted, while savages are farsighted. This is true also of animals.

As people grow older, their eyes usually grow weaker. Just because a man has reached the age of forty without wearing glasses, there is no reason for thinking that he will *never* need them. This fact is true of all races. There eyes are subject to practically the same variations in strength, the same penalties for misuse.

IT IS not only to relieve eyestrain, however, that people should have their eyes examined at least once every year. The human eye is literally a looking glass; for by gazing into it physicians can often detect the first signs of Bright's disease, and certain other troubles. Examination of the eye may reveal that glasses are not needed, but that unusual care in other directions is essential to preserve the health of the patient. In this way, diseases which might have eventually caused death have been checked in time.

Among those who read there may be some who dread to begin wearing glasses, for fear it will make them look old, or will in some way detract from their appearance. Women, of course, are especially reluctant to adopt glasses, as they have a perfectly natural desire to preserve their youth and their charm as long as possible. To such women one can only say that eyestrain invariably causes premature wrinkles and gives the face a tired, anxious, cross look which is far more disfiguring than glasses.

To men, one can merely put these questions.

Would you rather be exhausted at the end of the day?—for when your eyes are tired your body feels tired. Would you rather feel discouraged because your work calls for so much of your energy? Would you rather break down under the strain? Or will you, instead, cast aside your foolish prejudice and wear glasses which will prevent eyestrain and correct your vision?

There is only one answer for the sensible man or woman to make to these questions.

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